

Summary of Responses for Diocesan Planning Team from Holy Spirit, St. Anthony, St. John Cantius in St. Cloud (4-28-18)

We discussed the diocesan parish planning materials with each Finance and Pastoral Council in the parishes in our cluster as well as cluster staff. We also had a cluster-wide conversation facilitated by Brenda Kresky (35 attendees). These responses compile results of five gatherings.

Given the enormous amount of input the Team will receive from across the diocese, this is a summary of key highlights rather than a detailed transcription. Many of the points summarized here were cited by multiple people; individual observations were read but you may not find every comment here. Also, this is a record of conversations, not an endorsement of any particular option or a summary of the eventual plan. While we discussed the five questions provided, the main focus was on the key question: “What concrete recommendations do you have for this future planning?”

General Observations

As one might expect, responses were along a broad spectrum. People genuinely understand the challenge and see the need for change, compromise, and creative adaptations. Understandably, many are unaware of steps the diocese has already taken to address these trends, so some of the solutions they proposed – such as greater support and training for lay ministry and more foreign priests – are in operation or development already.

Quality Parish Life

Perhaps the most vigorous conversations took place around the idea of what marks a quality parish life and the resources needed. Among the factors and resources for “quality” parish life”:

- community (*probably the strongest single theme that came through in many ways*)
- attendance by members
- youth engagement and solid faith formation programs for all ages
- volunteers who are willing to participate and support the activity (perhaps through a volunteer coordinator)
- good and consistent communication
- witness / testimony and personal connections to engage others
- active outreach and service to larger community
- a vision and mission statement that is lived
- intentional intergenerational opportunities
- availability of quality prayer, worship, and sacramental experiences (Rosary before Mass, reverent celebrations, appropriate silence)
- an identifiable and approachable leader
- accessibility and parking
- a welcoming atmosphere

- social gatherings (not only fundraisers)
- access to affordable Catholic school education
- technology
- adequate finances and facilities|
- trained staff to serve all generations
- opportunities to reach various groups in the parish and community
- invested and engaged parishioners; gifts/skills/strengths that are identified and invited
- parish library
- availability of Eucharistic adoration

Maintaining a Catholic Presence with Fewer Priests

- more involvement by deacons and laity, both in administration and in spiritual leadership
- reduce the number of Masses or rotate sites
- “virtual” Mass or Communion services through technology with local distribution of Communion
- build larger communities; too many buildings
- focus on vocations; make vocations attractive
- married priests
- strengthen family life as the seedbed of vocations and participation in parish community
- better formation in evangelization
- outreach to inactive Catholics
- continue to recruit international priests
- fit the number of parishes to the population
- create centralized staff and administrative functions in regions; better collaboration
- utilize Parish Life Coordinators
- move from competition to cooperation
- prayer – perhaps specific prayer for this process

Regarding the Six Options For Parish Status

In general, there was strongest support for mergers, then other arrangements using fairly applied criteria (geography, finances, debt and liabilities, declining membership, etc.) to determine the best approach.

Many suggested reducing Masses or changing parish status before closure, although this can have a financial impact. Consider consistent approach to Word and Communion services – desired by some if Mass is not offered, but this can confuse the value of Mass with the convenience of simply receiving the Eucharist and work subtly against combining communities.

Closure of a parish was viewed by some as a last resort. Parishes that struggle with changing demographics did not choose this, nor is it their “fault” that the community has changed around

them ... perhaps they need more rather than less attention. Others strongly advocated for closure to better distribute clergy across the diocese.

Clustering has been done for many years – what have we learned from this? Is it preferable to a merger or some other arrangement? There is a need to study the benefits and losses in each of the six options.

Across the diocese, we will probably have a combination of all six options – just a need to be fair in how decisions are made and move gradually into mergers or other more disruptive changes for communities.

Some communities may need to add space or build facilities like parish halls or narthex/gathering spaces, etc. This will add financial pressure as well as need for careful education while other buildings are potentially emptied.

Overall Specific Suggestions for Planning

- greater financial support for lay ministry and volunteer training and retention
- focus on intergenerational connections and mentoring as a parish strength
- consider an outside consulting firm to broaden thinking and remove burden from diocesan staff to make hard decisions alone (*mentioned several times independently*)
- consider both hard (financial, demographic, geographic, number of available priests) and soft (history, community, faith) factors in the process
- be comfortable with a spectrum of the six options, though avoid closures if at all possible
- close parishes; close metro area parishes to allow more clergy to serve in outlying areas
- consider alternative “sites” to gather a faith community – not bound to parish church
- create excitement and evangelization focus from a conviction of abundance, rather than a resignation to scarcity
- use more Parish Life Coordinators to manage small faith communities (both within larger parishes with a resident pastor, and in smaller parishes with a canonical pastor)
- bring in foreign priests, other religious orders, Fraternity of St. Peter, Dominican Sisters, etc.
- pray, especially for vocations